

## Government as open book Web site proposal gains ground

By CHARLES S. JOHNSON of the Missoulian State Bureau

HELENA - By a large margin, the Senate gave preliminary approval to a bill to create a searchable state Web site so people can find out detailed information about Montana's budget, including revenues, appropriations and expenditures.

Senate Bill 241, sponsored by Sen. Joe Balyeat, R-Bozeman, won debate-stage approval 39-10.

Because of questions about its potential cost, the bill was sent to the Senate Finance and Claims Committee for more scrutiny before a final Senate vote.

"This is the much-ballyhooed transparency bill," Balyeat said, adding that 85 of the 150 legislators are co-sponsors.

The bill is entitled the "taxpayer right to know act."

Balyeat urged the Senate to join two dozen other states that have already established similar Web sites or are in the process of doing so.

What's more, he said, then-U.S. Sen. Barack Obama and Sen. John McCain passed a similar bipartisan bill in Congress in 2006 and the two presidential rivals led the effort to further strengthen it last year.

"It's not about Republicans versus Democrats," Balyeat said. "It's about taxpaying citizens having a right to see how their tax money is being spent."

The bill would cover budgets for all three branches of government: the executive, judicial and legislative branches. It would allow the public to search, retrieve and download specific details about state spending, taxes and other budget items.

An advisory committee would oversee creation of the Web site, with the job of establishing and maintaining the site assigned to the legislative fiscal analyst.

The bill would not allow any information now deemed private, such as the medical record, to be made public. The legislative fiscal analyst, who would be responsible for creating and maintaining the database, would be required to ensure that information protected under Montana's constitutional right to privacy could not be accessed on the Web site.

The bill would set a limit of \$275,000 a year to get the Web site up and running, although the governor's budget office said the costs were unknown.

Balyeat said Texas spent \$310,000 to create a similar Web site, and the state controller estimates it has led to savings of \$8.7 million. In most states that have these Web sites, the most frequent users are government employees who find out how other state departments are doing things more efficiently and adopt these practices, he said.

"I think it's worth the money, and as you know, I'm pretty tight," said Balyeat, a certified public accountant.

Sen. Carol Juneau, D-Browning, acknowledged that government transparency is probably important. However, she opposed spending the money on a new program in SB241, when appropriations subcommittees aren't funding necessary programs.

"Yesterday, they couldn't raise provider rates for foster care," she said. "There are terrible, terrible decisions in health and human service. I think we could hold up on the transparency for several years and help other people at this point."

Sen. Taylor Brown, R-Huntley, opposed delaying creating of the Web site, saying, "I think the sooner the better."

When the facts come out about the financial problems faced by Montana's public pension funds, which saw multimillion-dollar losses in their investments, "we're going to want everyone to know."